

**ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CATHOLIC CHURCH
AUGUSTINIAN FATHERS**

185 St. Thomas Drive
OJAI, CALIFORNIA 93023

January, 1991

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

As the old year ends and a new one begins the face-off in the Persian Gulf continues to tick away. The moment of truth approaches, scheduled within the month.

I don't know what religious or moral scruples, if any, are acting on Mr Hussein as he moves toward the showdown. Whatever the constraints resulting, though, I do hope that Mr. Bush, representing me, is guided by Christian principles and values.

Not since the Crusades, at least in Catholic circles, has there been much talk about a "holy" war. God forgive us some of the things we have done in His name! Tracing itself back to St. Augustine, however, there does continue in Christian tradition the notion and theory of a "just" war. Augustine himself never justified violence to protect self-interest. The Christian, he felt, would do better to suffer harm than to injure or kill an enemy. It is only to protect the rights and welfare of the other that a Christian may take up arms. There are, he conceded, situations where the harm threatened family, nation or friends is of such magnitude as to justify war. Even when this is true, strict conditions restrict the ensuing violence: it must be the last resource, all other means having been tried and failed; there must be a proportion between the foreseen damage and the good to be achieved; the violence must be contained so that the innocent are protected. Winning through the obliteration of civilian populations is always in the words of Vatican Council II a "moral abomination."

It should be noted that the relevance of even these restrictions is called into question by some today. Given the destructive potential of today's weapons and the risk of any exchange of firepower escalating into all-out nuclear war, can the proportionality between harm foreseen and good to be achieved ever be guaranteed? Is widespread destruction of civilians inherent not just in the execution but the strategy of modern warfare?

I thank God decision in the crisis does not rest on me. Yet none of us is entirely free of all responsibility. Peace is probably the best basis for an end-of-year examination of conscience and start-of-year prayer. Have my lifestyle and my attitudes made war more or less likely or necessary? Have my actions and choices this past year weighed toward harmony or discord?

And for a New Year's prayer - "Let there be peace on earth. And let it begin with me."

In Christ,



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February, 1991

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

St Thomas Aquinas, the parish patron, as far as I know never discussed in his famous Summa the question of where to fly the flag. He did in his writings, however, provide some insights for anyone faced with the dilemma.

For many of us, watching TV these past few weeks has been our first good look at life in an Islamic state. In Saudi Arabia the Koran is not only sacred scripture it is the law of the land as well. There are no separate entities of church and state, just a single religious/political unit. Christians, being infidels, are of necessity political outsiders as well. The question could never come up of where to display the crescent.

Watching has made most of us more than ever grateful for our separation of church and state. Religion in America is not a private affair but the society of believers is the Church not the State. We live in and hope to preserve a system where one can be Christian, Jew or Muslim without being any the less American. For those of us who are Christian the symbols of our double loyalty, the cross and the flag, are both revered and precious. But they are not interchangeable nor everywhere appropriate. It is neither a Christian state nor an American church.

If it is not a Christian or a Jewish or a Muslim state, though, how can religion not be private, with nothing to contribute to public affairs? St. Thomas answers that question with his treatment of Natural Law. There is an objective, knowable moral order which religion throws light on. Indiscriminate, unnecessary killing, for example, (including but not limited to the unborn) is not wrong because the Bible says so. Because it is wrong, the Bible forbids it. Centuries of reflection on the Gospels and their moral implications have helped Christians not to see Christian truth but reality and the human condition as it is and as it should be.

Not everybody is happy that we don't have the American flag in the sanctuary. It's absence is meant to say what this letter has tried to say.

In Christ,

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March, 1991

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

The annual Religious Education Congress in Los Angeles is always a crash course on "The Church Today." Some of the best minds on the American scene are there giving talks, the latest books, publications and materials are on display and a large cross section of active, involved Catholics is present exchanging views and experiences. Checking out the topics covered by the experts, browsing through the exhibit hall and a couple days watching and listening to the participants brings a person up to date on what's going on in the Church beyond the valley.

The move in and out of the fast lane takes adjustment. Compared to the spectacular liturgies put on in the Anaheim Arena ours seem tame indeed. Results achieved by dramatic experiments elsewhere make our progress look quite modest. Two days mingling with the best and the brightest can take the luster off discussions back home.

Everybody probably came away from the Congress with different impressions and observations. Here are some of mine: the dance has definitely arrived in liturgy, maybe not yet in Ojai but certainly in the cultured, artistic metropolis to the south of us. Men are back. Last year I felt lonely, one of an endangered species. This year women were still in the majority but there were men, too. Husbands dragged along? Pastors checking up on staff? Whoever and whyever, it was good to see. The big church is a no-no. Whether it was 16,000 people in the vast arena learning about intimacy or workshops in the Hilton hearing about 3rd world comunidades de base, the quest is on for small community.

Impressed as I am by the desire itself and the good these can do, some questions remain. What is the state of the Church in America and how much restructuring does it need on the local level? If the parish becomes a "community of communities" where is the primary sense of belonging? What does the breaking-up do to our awareness of being a eucharistic, sacramental church?

Back in the 60's I restructured an entire school onto modular scheduling. It was, for me at least, a learning experience. The fact that 20 years later hardly anybody knows what modular scheduling is just goes to show why I am cautious about restructuring anything.

In Christ,



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May, 1991

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

St. Paul assures us that it is OK to grieve. He warns us, though, not to grieve as pagans "who have no hope." That advice from Scripture would seem to apply not only when we lose a relative or a friend but at the passing of a familiar institution or a cherished tradition.

It is natural and right that the parish should grieve at the news that our school is closing. For 36 years the school has been an integral part of the life of the community. Most families have stories about how it got started or remember the days of the Sisters or can point to something on campus that they helped make or pay for. More energy and effort have probably been spent on the school through these years than on any other parish project. Because a school elicits enormous support, it also generates intense loyalty.

If most everybody has put something into the school, it is likewise true that the school has left something of itself in many, many parishioners. What education is all about is to change us at the core and permanently. We feel deeply about a school because a school affects us, or just as importantly our children, deeply and lastingly.

So a sense of loss is appropriate and we would be strange indeed if we did not experience it. But we have to respond also as people of faith, confident that what God has done in the past in one way he can do in the future in another. This is a time to celebrate and be grateful for the tremendous blessing the school has been and to be sure that the good begun there bears fruit for years to come. Most of the time the real value of a school can only be gauged by what happens to its alumni after they have left. Maybe the real contribution of this school will be seen in how we adjust when it is gone.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "John Paul".



ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CATHOLIC CHURCH
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185 St. Thomas Drive
Ojai, California 93023

June, 1991

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish

From wine-tasting to tennis, from golf to music, Ojai is an old hand at hosting tournaments and important events. Without much fanfare and unknown to most of the locals, from the 16th to the 21st of June the Valley will be hosting a Chapter of the California Province of Augustinians.

Those who think meetings are a recent and infernal disruption of ecclesial efficiency will be surprised to discover that as "Chapters" they go way back to the beginnings of religious life, in fact tend to be more important the older the Order. Those who think democracy is a threat to the Church let loose by the American Revolution should know that monks and friars have been governing themselves for centuries. The 3,200 or so Augustinians around the world live in 526 "houses", grouped together in 31 "provinces." Each house is required to have a chapter once a month, each province has one every four years and the order one every six years. The chapter is not simply a discussion session nor a council meeting. It sits as a governing body. Chapters regulate day-to-day affairs, make plans for the future and refurbish the vision. At Villanova in June, e.g., we will revise our by-laws, take a look at the finances, examine our formation program. There will also be time spent on an Augustinian philosophy of education and how to implement it in our schools, the pastoral needs of the Church and how to balance them with our community needs, the role of a local superior and how to help him fill it.

St. Augustine saw community life as basically a group of friends come together to search for God. For Augustine, that search requires friends. "If one would find God," he wrote, "let him have friends." Among friends there are no "ins" and "outs", no rulers and ruled. In Augustine's first blueprint for a community, members simply took turns carrying the unwelcome but necessary burden of being superior. In his Rule the virtue stressed in the relationship between the one in charge and others is not obedience but charity - the superior providing the service of authority with gentleness and love and everybody else feeling sorry for the poor soul, giving him the help and cooperation he needs. Augustinians down through the ages have probably been sorry models of blind obedience and rigid discipline. It's consoling to reflect that obedience has never been our charism. The insight (and I hope the example) of authority as service and compliance as an exercise of charity is, however, no small contribution. It applies not only to religious communities but to all human organizations including families and states. Put into practice, it could even contribute to that kinder, gentler society we are said to be becoming.



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185 St. Thomas Drive
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July, 1991

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

The Ojai 4th of July Parade is my kind of celebration. Your Philadelphia mummers may be more colorful, the Pasadena Rose Parade is certainly more spectacular and the Hollywood victory bash was much more awesome but is there anywhere a kinder, gentler display of civic pride than we have here?

Part of the appeal of our event comes from the fact that it would appeal to no one else. Imagine, if you can, the well-loved pink moment display amidst the ticker tape of Wall Street. The bands and floats and marching groups are enjoyed not because they are first-rate but because they are familiar and our own.

The virtue of patriotism prompts us to cherish what is ours precisely because it is ours, not because it is biggest or best. If I love rightly what is mine simply because it is mine, I feel no compulsion to make what is yours mine nor what is mine yours. I understand better how fond you must be of what belongs to you. Patriotism applies directly to the "patria", the fatherland, but it can be extended to one's parish, one's kids, one's work. It makes us truly care about all that God's providence has put into our care.

In Christ,



ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CATHOLIC CHURCH
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September, 1991

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

The last time the Holy Father came to America I was here as a visitor from Rome myself. What impressed me at the time was how the TV commentators kept stressing the fact that the Church is not a democracy and that the pope would not be coming to take a vote or conduct an opinion poll. Having made plain what the Church is not, TV was not so clear on how the Church does govern itself.

Actually, there is no exact civil model. The Church is not a democracy but it is not supposed to be a dictatorship either. Baptism makes every Christian "priest, king and prophet." The Spirit "breathes where he wills" and his gifts are distributed throughout the whole community of believers. To describe the organization and administration of this unique People of God all sorts of long, foreign sounding words have had to be coined, words like "hierarchical", "magisterium", "participatory", "subsidiarity."

On the parish level, the Pastoral Council is a response to the call that all have received to participate fully in a communal life of faith. The Council is not set up to help the pastor "run the parish." There is an efficient staff and a multitude of ministers and ministries to do that. It is not set up to supervise the pastor, either. The bishop and a multitude of offices and departments are already doing that.

Anyone who wants to administer would be disappointed on a good Council. The Council doesn't run the parish but examines where it is running and what it is running on. Anyone who wants to instruct is probably being called by the Spirit to write a book and meetings would only take time away from true mission. A Council has to learn through much prayer, shared insights and varied experiences what the parish actually is like at any particular time and what it is being called by the gospels to become.

"Where there is no vision", we are warned, "a people perishes." It is the role of the Pastoral Council to work on the Parish's vision - to make it clearer, truer, more illumined by faith.

In Christ,



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December, 1991

Dear Member of St. Thomas Parish,

"We want you back!" AT&T pleads unashamedly with former customers on national TV. If loss of profits can move a giant corporation to such humble ways, should the church be any less fervent at this time of year in its appeal to those fallen away, alienated or inactive?

Those invited to the stable that first Christmas were all people not habitual to the site - shepherds called in from their life apart and strangers led from foreign ways and places. This Christmas, too, it may be that the ones Jesus most wants with him are those who don't much frequent the church - people angry or hurt, the young and disinterested or the old and disappointed.

What everyone found at the crib was a baby's unselective, indiscriminate love and a spirit of welcome and acceptance. Each of us should find in the church that same reception. Christmas, especially, all should feel at home. When you come, bring a friend. Or even someone not yet a friend.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Fr. Pat".